

WHITETAIL INSTITUTE SUCCESS *founded on* 20 YEARS OF RESEARCH

By **Matt Harper**, Whitetail Institute Deer Nutritionist

When I was much younger, I looked forward to my birthday. In fact, it was a neck-and-neck race between my birthday and Christmas morning. Now that I have aged, the excitement about turning a year older seems to have lost some of its luster. On my past couple of birthdays, I actually had to be reminded it was my birthday, and when I was reminded, I wished that I had been left in oblivion. On the other hand, I've found that anniversaries tend to follow a different emotional curve with the passing of

time. With each new year comes an increasing appreciation for the accomplishment of reaching another milestone. This year, 2008, marks the 20th year the Whitetail Institute has been in the business of providing deer hunters with products they need to improve their deer herds and hunting experience. As we look back at those 20 years, one glaring consistency is the Institute's unwavering focus on research. Research is the backbone of the Whitetail Institute and one of the main reasons why a 20-year anniversary is possible.

From the beginning, research was the foundation of the philosophy behind the Whitetail Institute. Ray Scott, founder and president, was not only an avid fisherman but also an avid hunter. For as long as he could remember, Ray planted greenfields on his hunting property. This was a common practice used to supply a food source that would attract deer out of Southern pine plantations into an area where the cross-hairs or the broadhead could find its mark. Through the years, Ray noticed that deer seemed to





prefer certain types of food sources. With that in mind, he went to the local feed-and-seed store and bought several types of forages and planted them on his property. During hunting season, he studied which fields consistently attracted the most deer. Though Ray didn't realize it at the time, he was conducting a type of research that would later be used by the Institute to perform revolutionary research trials called "cafeteria testing."

What Ray discovered was that deer on his hunting property consistently preferred clover fields to other types of forage. With this newfound knowledge, Ray theorized that if clover was preferred over other forages, deer might prefer a certain species of clover over

other clovers. Realizing that almost all clover varieties on the market were designed for domestic livestock, it became apparent to Ray that he would need to develop a new clover variety designed specifically for deer. Ray had never been one for doing things halfway, and his clover research method was no different. He sought the professional help of world-renowned plant geneticist Dr. Wiley Johnson, a plant genetics professor at Auburn University, who was recognized for developing many clover varieties still used in the agricultural market. His research was in the area was second to none. Ray approached Johnson with one simple goal: "Develop a clover variety to meet the specific needs of a whitetail deer." Ray proposed to Johnson that the clover type should be not only the most attractive to deer but also contain a nutritional profile that would supply important nutrients needed for improved antler growth, increased body weights and overall deer-herd improvement. The idea that a forage should not only be attractive to deer but also of specific nutritional benefit to them was a new twist that had never been considered before. Until that time, forages had only been planted to attract deer. Now, Ray and Johnson were working on a product to both attract deer and provide them valuable,

specific nutrition. The idea of the food plot was born. To begin his research, Johnson started with over 100 clover varieties from all over the world, each containing characteristics and traits that applied to specific nutritional needs and browsing preferences of deer. Although each variety had favorable attributes, none combined all the deer-specific characteristics. Testing was conducted on each variety to identify characteristics such as nutrient content, hardiness, ease of establishment, cold and heat tolerance, disease and drought resistance, longevity and, of course, attractiveness to deer. Varieties that exhibited the best characteristics were crossbred to produce new strains. Those new clover types were then tested and evaluated based on the same criteria. The new clover types with the best traits were again crossbred. That procedure was repeated over seven years until a clover strain was eventually developed that contained all the traits ideal for deer food plots.

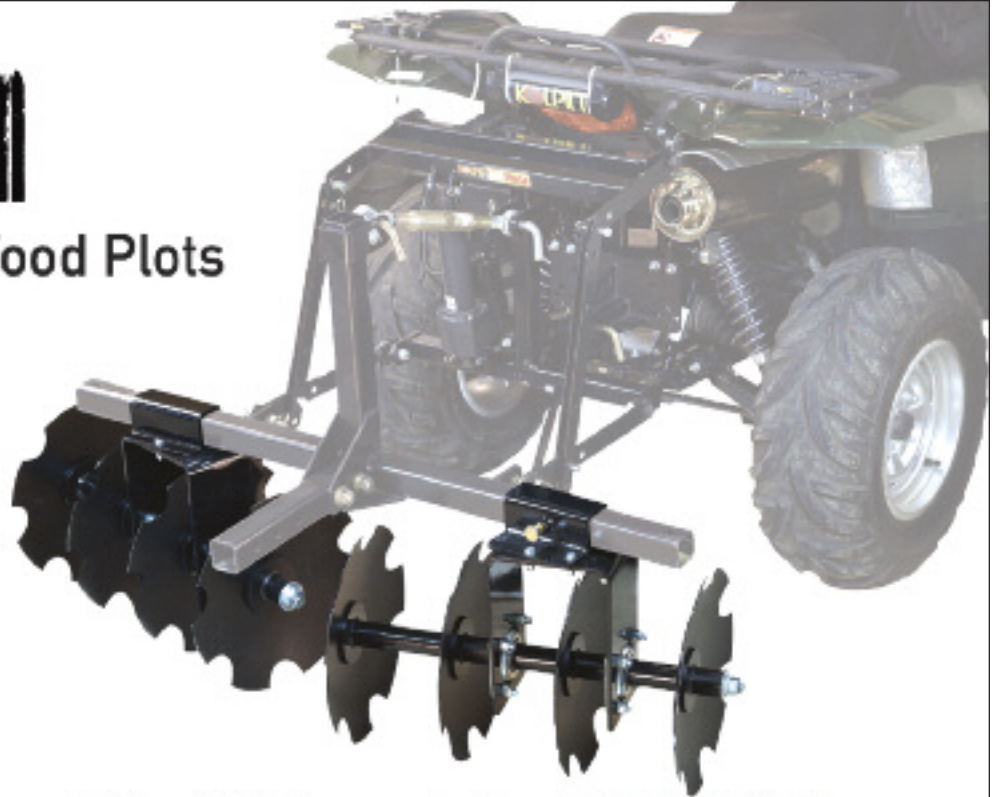
The resulting clover type was easy to establish, drought and disease resistant, had an unsurpassed protein level year-round (up to 35%), and provided unequalled attractiveness to deer. It was called Advantage clover, and it became the first clover type genetically selected for deer.

Johnson continued working on clover crossbreeding, and a few years after the introduction of Advantage, a new and even more drought-resistant clover type called Insight was developed. Advantage and Insight remain the main components in Imperial Whitetail Clover. To this day, no other food plot company has conducted such in-depth and innovative forage research, and Imperial Whitetail Clover remains the only clover food plot product specifically and geneti-



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cally developed for whitetail deer. Research at the Whitetail Institute is not limited to clover genetics. During the past 20 years, researchers at the Whitetail Institute have developed other revolutionary products, including Imperial Extreme, Imperial Alfa-Rack Plus and Cutting Edge Nutritional Products just to name a few. The basic philosophy of Whitetail Institute researchers is to identify a need in a deer nutritional program and then develop a product to fulfill that need, even if it seems impossible at the beginning. For example, researchers determined a need to develop a perennial product that would tolerate with as little as 15 inches of annual rain. The result was Imperial Extreme.

Through the years, the Whitetail Institute has followed a research methodology that is unequalled in the deer nutrition industry. The first step in this methodology is a meeting of the minds. Whitetail Institute management and staff get together with Institute researchers for a round-table discussion about food plot forages, nutritional supplements and other needs of the deer nutrition industry. There is probably no other group that has as vast an understanding of deer nutritional-management needs. The Whitetail Institute staff talks to tens of thousands of deer hunters each month, which puts their collective finger on the pulse of deer hunters and managers more than any other company. From that round-table meeting, a research plan is devised for the upcoming years.

Research begins in small enclosure pens at the Institute. First, test products are tested in five 1- to 3-acre pens with captive deer. This pen system lets researchers obtain data on deer and products being tested that would otherwise be impossible to obtain, for example intake amounts, detailed preference data

and many other important research specifics. Greenhouse and nursery fields are also utilized by researchers to determine test-forage characteristics such as drought and disease resistance, hardiness and nutritive value. These findings are then evaluated along with data collected from other sources such as the pens. Test products that pass the small-pen stage then go to semi-wild facilities for further trials. These semi-wild enclosures of 80 acres or larger contain captive deer, but the enclosed habitat is more like wild deer habitat. Test products are again subjected to various testing methodologies, and additional data are collected.

After the semi-wild enclosures, test products move on for testing on 100% wild deer. This stage lets researchers collect product test data under real-world conditions. I mentioned cafeteria testing, a procedure in which several forage varieties are planted in a specific and duplicated pattern to determine characteristics such as attractiveness, regrowth and total forage production. The wild deer areas allow for very large cafeteria-style testing, such as 40 or more varieties replicated four or more times in a field.

After the wild deer test comes the final phase, which is conducted by field testers. Duplicated test samples are sent out across North America so that the test products can be evaluated in a broad range of real-life conditions. Up to 100 or more testers can be used in this phase, with all regions of whitetail country represented. These field testers are sent "blind" test products; specific content information is not disclosed so that the tests remain unbiased. The testers also receive detailed instructions and report forms for recording their findings and observations concerning the test

products.

Once the Institute receives the report forms back from the testers, all data concerning each phase of testing is evaluated in detail. If a product does not get at least a 95 percent approval rating, it is put back on the proverbial drawing board. Although this process is intricate and time consuming, it also ensures that products released by the Whitetail Institute have been tested beyond reasonable expectations, giving consumers peace of mind that the product is the best that the Whitetail Institute can make it.

Research started the Whitetail Institute, and it remains the Institute's top priority. When the bows and guns are put away for another year, researchers at the Whitetail Institute are still hard at work developing the best deer nutrition products in the world.



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